The house was antebellum and it showed. Everything about it was tarnished, cracked, faded, to'up, shabby and old. Being imaginative and generous, one could assume that it once had glory - with its lofty three stories, extensive footprint, and silhouette of resplendent gables and towers. Not now, however. Now it was barely enough of a shamble to offer shelter from a sprinkle or a gentle breeze. There were foot-wide cracks in the outlaying bricks, the interior walls were slap-dash, the roof was devout ("holey") and all the windows were broken and dishearteningly boarded up. For safety reasons, a rational human would never choose to spend a night there.

But it was reportedly haunted.

And that alone makes some people take a turn for the stupid.

Allow me to introduce Virgil Templeton, founding member of the Paranormal Investigators of South South East Texas or (PISSET). Not to be confused with the South South East Texas Paranormal Investigators (SSETPI), which was founded by Virgil's Ex-BFF, Shane Muncie (the prick) after the two had a irreparable falling-out over the significance of Stanley Kubrick's movie "The Shining".

Virgil stands a moderate 5 feet, 8 inches, weighs more than he should at an even 200 pounds. Of course he wears glasses. He graduated from college but found a lucrative career unrelated to his field of study (English) by applying his computer programming hobby skills to a professional service and raked in yearly six figure salary.

This allows him to buy lots of toys; such as digital thermometers, EMF meters, thermographic and night vision cameras, handheld and static digital video cameras, digital audio recorders, and laptop computers. Whew. So armed with these toys, Virgil is single-mindedly dedicated to proving the existence of life after death and, more specifically, the existence of hell, which would perforce prove there is a heaven. And so fuck you, Shane Muncie.

Virgil, his toys, and a small but impassioned crew of ghost-hunters received permission to spend a night in the old, haunted house and they were determined to make the most of the opportunity. But without enough bodies to double, each PISSET member had to be assigned their own section to monitor. Yes,

they would be connected by technology - cell phones and such - but otherwise each PISSET would be totally alone in a closed off room of a haunted house.

Enough to give you chills, no?

Virgil's toys; Virgil's party, so he took the prime location: the west-wing tower. Oh! What a story that was! So around the turn of the century, the beautiful wife of the house gave birth to an even more beautiful daughter. No problem there, until the daughter became 'of age' and the wife began suspecting the husband of infidelity and incest. So she did the rational thing and locked the daughter up in the west-wing tower; completely sealing the room behind a brick wall with only a small opening to deliver food and water.

When the husband learned of this, he too did a rational thing: created a secret trap door in the floor of the tower so he could enter the room without the wife knowing. He considered this his "bird-in-the-cage" solution.

Did I mention the husband was a medical doctor? And he knew how to perform abortions?

Anyway, by the time the daughter had found the ways and means to commit suicide, she was good and insane from the decades of imprisonment and abuse. Also, the Post Oak Tree in the back yard had grown massive and sprawling from being fed with her aborted fetuses, and the house's timber would never completely dry from the sopping of her tears and blood.

Pretty gruesome.

*****

The room went off like the 4th of July. Lights and buzzers; lasers and alarms. Virgil came out of his chair like he'd been shot from a cannon and started slapping buttons and twisting nobs.

What the hell?

The digital readouts on the thermometers plunged and spiked like dub-music equalizers. The EMF meters showed all zeros - impossible. And the motion sensitive cameras would not stop focusing, flashing and clicking where there was nothing at all.

Holy shit!

A surge of energy coursed through the room; blowing out everything electrical, sucking all the air from Virgil's lungs and lifting the hair on his head.

And then the ghost appeared. She was at once beautiful and rancid, a vision of loveliness overlayed with the purifying shell of a corpse long dead. Or was it the other way around? A cadaver wearing the sheen of what once was its glorious, sublime humanity?

The phantasm lifted its arms and floated towards Virgil, dragging a powerful sense of rot across the room with it.

Hold me, Virgil heard the words in his head, though the horror did not move its mouth. Only its schizophrenic sets of eyes - one set blue and vibrant, wide and wonderful; the other naught put black pits dripping slime - each flickering in and out of reality, spoke directly to Virgil using inexplicable telekinesis.

I'm so alone. Hold me.

Virgil recoiled, then found his spine. He stood erect, chest out. Adrenaline coursed through his body, but he would not take flight. Not now, not from this.

"Who are you?" Virgil said in a voice he'd hoped would sound commanding, but still came out squeaky.

The ghost drew closer, within an arm's reach now. With a force of will Virgil had never displayed before, bravery he'd never even thought he'd had, he stood fast. Feet planted firmly. Chin tilted upward. The smell of the creature flared his nostrils but he would not retreat.

"Who are you?" he asked again. "What do you want?"

Hold me.

The specter's hand reached out and touched Virgil's shoulder. In that moment, the rancid part of the creature fell away leaving only the beguiling beauty. Young, flawless. Hourglass curves under a gossamer gown. Flowing blond hair and a perfect, heart-shaped face.

I'm so alone....

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"Jesus," Brian said. "So what did you do?"

Virgil sipped coffee, set the cup down slowly and deliberately. "I hit that," he said, smiling.

Brian slapped the tabletop with a flat palm and exclaimed, "You did not!"

Virgil nodded, grinning like a mule.

Brian looked around the coffee shop. None of the other patrons noticed or cared about the outburst. They were all busy with their phones. He leaned across the table and said using his inside voice, "Are you fucking crazy?"

"Hey look," Virgil said, getting annoyed. "She was beautiful, okay? What was I supposed to do?"

"But she was, it was...," Brian searched for the words, waving his hands around. "I don't know. Evil? Probably?"

"No, she wasn't."

"How do you know?"

"Well she didn't look evil, anyway. She smelled kind of bad, but after awhile you stop noticing that."

"Jesus." Brian sat back and watched his friend drink coffee. There was a smug, knowing look on Virgil's face that made Brian uneasy.

"Would you do something for me?" Brian asked. "Come with me and see my priest, Father Leget. He's a nice guy, and he'll know-"

"Un huh. Nope. No way." Virgil shook his head. "None of that."

"But what if she...? I mean, how did you...? Was it really.... Like...?"

"Yes, it really was. And it was great! I'm glad it happened and I'm going to..."

"Oh no. No no no, no you're not."

"Yes, I am. I've got permission to set up again this weekend."

"Virgil," Brian grabbed his forearm with a hand. "You can't."

Virgil pulled his arm away. "I can, I am, and I will! Look, Brian, it is easy for you. How many girls are you dating now? Five? More? Not me. I have to take it where I can get it."

"Oh come on! You can't possibly be that hard up!"

"Not anymore I'm not!"

Brian shook his head. Virgil drank more coffee.

"In fact." Virgil cleared his throat. "In fact, she was my first."

Brian's jaw dropped. His lips parted, his teeth separated, and his jaw unhinged. A fly could have easily buzzed right in and settled on top of his molars.

"Don't look at me like that."

"But Virgil..., Brian stammered. "You're, like, thirty something years old."

"Thirty three."

"And you never...?"

"No. Not until last Saturday. I sit before you no longer a thirty three year old virgin."

Brian rubbed a hand across his face. He expelled breath. "Virgil, buddy. I'm not sure it counts."

"It counts for me."